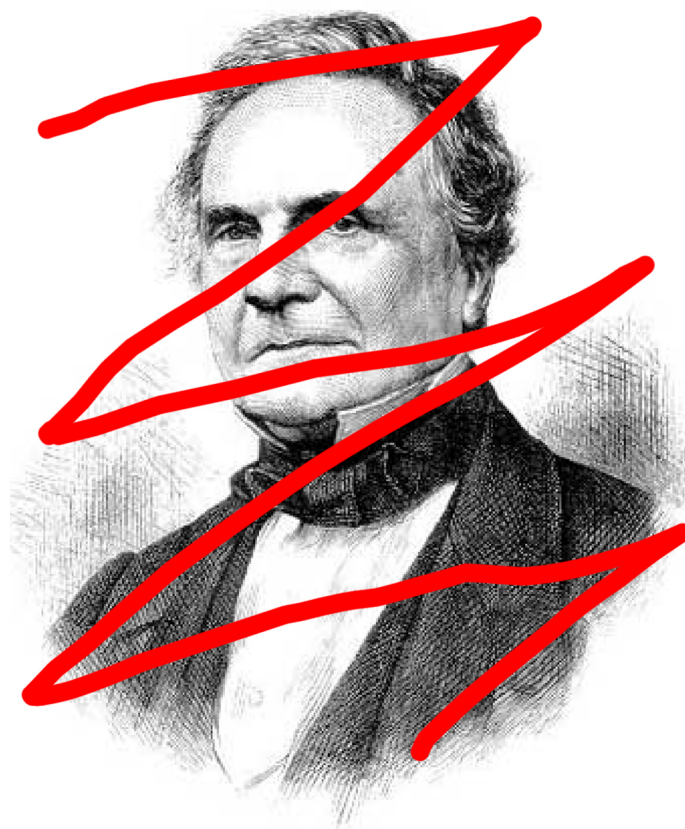


Babbage's Disease



Edwin Birch

For the rats.

Babbage's Disease

by Edwin Birch

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On Failing to Write a Simple Fucking Novella, the Dangers of Research and Rats as a Unit of Measurement

The tortured and prolonged birth of the insubstantial and ridiculous volume you are about to enjoy/endure was once a source of humour between myself and my dear friend Olchar E. Lindsann. I started work on it during my first term at Dartington College of Arts (though it was originally a play and bore little resemblance to this “finished” “product” save for the central protagonist of Charles Babbage and his titular unspecified disease) and have been fitfully writing, rewriting, ignoring and occasionally utterly abandoning it ever since.

“How's *Babbage* coming along?” Olchar would chuckle jovially at me. “Ha ha,” I would respond, before punching him squarely in his

scrawny Yank gob. Yes, my seeming inability to fart out one simple fucking novella was once nothing more than a hilarious joke. But jokes soon wear thin if bereft of variation and never has this felt truer for me than in relation to my bastard unfinished novella.

Writers are never completely happy with their work, we all know that, but the “love-hate-tolerate-no, definitely hate-actually, this isn't so bad after all is it?-let's just try and sort out this... wait a second, no-hate hate HATE” relationship I have developed with this novella goes far beyond the usual crisis in confidence I seem to have with most everything I spew out.

I wish I had an explanation, an excuse, but there is none. It's not as though it was even that challenging to write. I deliberately avoided conducting anything more than the barest minimum of research as I feared too much

reality might taint the overall process. The last thing I wanted was for some facts to seep in and ruin all my fun. All I had to do was sit in front of a keyboard and make stuff up. Easy. You could do that. A fucking *rat* could do that – I should know, I've seen them at it.

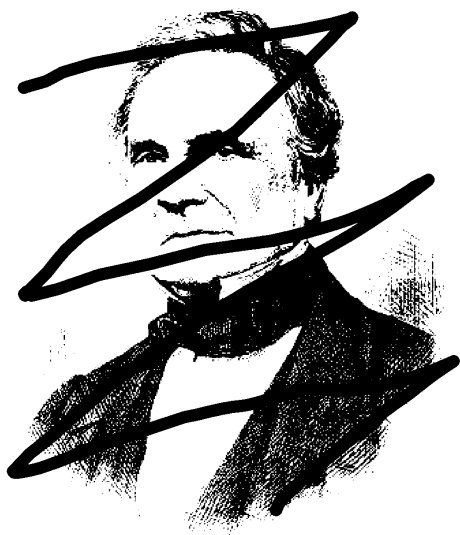
Speaking of rats, during the course of writing (or, more often, failing to write) this book I met and fell in love with my first domestic rat. I named him Mr Hugo Ball-Rat and I took him home without the faintest idea of how I was supposed to look after him. My partner and I began to read about the proper care of these magical and distressingly short-lived beasts and soon discovered that we were doing it wrong (lesson one – don't keep rats on their own unless emotionally torturing rats is your bag). Since then our home (which has been located in a surprising variety of towns and counties over the years) has always been shared with a

colony of rats who have more often than not come to us in a state of disrepair. Twenty-three in total, of which just three elderly chaps remain. They are to be our last.

I could count the time it's taken for me to write this book in years, perhaps even months if I wanted to. I could count it in jobs, in homes, in pseudonyms, but on balance I think I prefer to count it in rats. This book has taken me twenty-three rats to write. Let us hope I don't have to count the next one in dogs.

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1871. A room without a clock. Books you wouldn't understand plaster the peeling walls and sprawl about the room in smug little piles, tarnishing the air with the scent of paper stained with ideas. Wedged into the carcass of an ancient, miserable armchair and hunched over a writing desk large enough to plan a war on sits a mathematician. He has just put down his pencil and is ready to participate in a fiction. "Hello!" says the mathematician. "Hello!" say I. Why don't you say "Hello!" too, dear reader? Go on, don't be shy. There. Now we have all greeted one another, let us begin our story.

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The mathematician coughed. It was a nasty cough - a prolonged period of hacking and wheezing and rancid, burbling phlegm. It caused Mrs Front, the mathematician's elderly housekeeper to look up from dusting the stuffed dog on the mantelpiece and remark "Goodness me, that's a nasty cough you've got there, Mr Babbage!".

Mr Babbage (for the housekeeper was not mistaken in addressing him as such) attempted to respond with a gruff muttering of "Poppycock!" only for his statement to be forcibly interrupted between the second and

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third syllables by a sudden, violent paroxysm. The cataclysmic cough shook the old man's body like a malevolent child toying with a dead frog and caused Babbage to launch a globule of thick, brown mucus about the size of a golf ball out of his helpless mouth. Both he and Mrs Front watched with horrified fascination as the sticky gobbet arced gracefully across the length of Babbage's rotting study and landed with a sickening *splap* onto the pages of an opened atlas, somewhere in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

"Are you quite well, Mr Babbage?" asked Mrs Front, adopting an expression of sincere concern.

"Quite... quite... quite..." said the gentleman as his loose, ruddy face folded in

on itself in anticipation of the oncoming sneeze. "...Weuuurchgl!" he concluded with a wet, sticky grimace. The snot was primrose yellow this time, and it spurted dramatically all over his third-best waistcoat.

Mrs Front dabbed ineffectually at the viscous mess with an old cloth and tutted to no one in particular. "Well, I don't know, Mr Babbage," she said. "I mean to say, a clever gentleman such as yourself. You'd think you'd know better than to go getting all ill like this, wouldn't you?"

"For the last time, Mrs Front, I am not *ill*!" Babbage grumbled petulantly, accidentally hurling a vile, greenish substance the texture of custard all over her neck in the process.

"Well, I think you ought to see a doctor," said Mrs Front, calmly wiping herself down

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with the cloth (which by now was completely saturated with mucus and phlegm). “Now drink up your tea. It'll do you good,” she concluded, setting a milky, lukewarm beverage which, in more competent hands, may have actually stood a chance of becoming a cup of tea, onto the freshly-doiled end-table beside him.

Babbage glanced at it forlornly. For all his protestations, he knew that he was not a well man. He had come to this conclusion several weeks ago, after suddenly gasping awake in the middle of a dream about sentient bricks. Eyelids twitching, coated in acrid sweat and his ears ringing like a collapsing bell-tower, he jolted upright and howled with the shock of it. He had spent the remainder of that sorry night attempting to rid himself of a severe headache (the kind which feels like kicking

made of pins) with the aid of some gentle algebra. At first, Babbage had tried to put his symptoms down to that extra glass of port he had indulged in after dinner, but the headache had been his constant companion ever since, bringing a cavalcade of coughs, sneezes and other sundry niggles with it.

Whatever its origins, the illness was not welcome. Babbage was on the cusp of a major scientific breakthrough and felt bitterly disappointed that, at a mere seventy-nine years of age, he also appeared to be on the cusp of his own death.

Whenever he closed his tiring eyes he could picture it perfectly – the mechanical mathematician, the clockwork brain, a machine that could count! Oh, how his fingers twitched and writhed with

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anticipation at the mere thought of such a device! And he could see it, right there, tucked behind his eyelids – every cog, every dial, every switch, every swab, every ball and bell and tiny brass twig of it. It was all there, pining for the stroke of a pencil, longing to be realised.

However, the moment Babbage opened his eyes once more and sucked in the damp, miserable reality of his leather-caked study, the image died and took his hope with it. Reality burst in on his dreams like a drunken bell-end at an otherwise pleasant party, who insists on telling you slightly racist jokes. Every time Babbage reached for his pencil it was always too late. His revolutionary machine had slunk away once more, hunched in the corner of his cluttered subconscious, all but unimagined, waiting

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patiently for the next time he dared to close his eyes.

Babbage sniffed, sighed and sipped his tea. It tasted of shit.

000010

"Morning, Mr Babbage!" cried Mrs Front cheerfully, rousing her employer from an uneasy sleep with the aid of a well-aimed feather duster.

"What? Bloody... gah!" he exclaimed, snapping erect in his decaying armchair and sending dozens of scrawled diagrams and calculations fluttering about him like very clever snow.

"I see you didn't go to bed last night, Mr Babbage. Up all night working on that fanciful machine of yours, were we?"

"It is *not* a fanciful machine, Mrs Front," Babbage replied tersely. "It is an analytical engine and once I have completed it it will revolutionise the study and practice of mathematics forever!"

"No doubt, Mr Babbage, but unless it helps me to do the cooking and cleaning I've no use for it," replied his wrinkled housekeeper bluntly. "Feeling a little better this morning, are we?"

"We are, Mrs Front, we are," Babbage lied. He'd thrown up a sort of lumpy, orange bile three times last night, and his hands had kept him awake with their incessant, merciless itching.

"Glad to hear it," beamed Mrs Front, her ample bosom quivering jovially. "I've made you eggs and kippers for breakfast. I thought

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you could do with getting a proper meal down you. You barely touched your casserole last night."

"Thank you, Mrs Front," said Babbage without looking up from his papers. "Is there anything in my diary today?" Mrs Front peered at the appropriate page of the book.

"No visitors, no public engagements... Oh! It says here that today is Shrove Tuesday. Shall I make you some pancakes to go with your kippers?"

"No thank you, Mrs Front. That will be all, I think," said Babbage with a cough and a sigh. No visitors... No visitors... He rolled the thought around his head as though it were a boiled sweet. No visitors... No old school chums, no fellow academics, no well-meaning neighbours or nosy clergymen. No

one ever seemed to visit any more... not even the children. Ha, he thought. Good. They'd only get in the way, after all. There is an infinite amount of work to be done and a finite amount of time in which to do it. Children and the rest of them are best kept out of that particular equation.

After Mrs Front had bustled off to attend to her other duties, Babbage took a cautious glance at a kipper. The mere sight of it made him feel nauseous. He decided to breakfast on brandy instead, and hastily downed a couple of quick ones before Mrs Front could shuffle back into the drawing room and catch him in the act. The moment he picked up his pencil he realised the brandy had been a mistake. He felt the cough rise up from his gut. It came out solid, speckled and smelling of marbles.

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“Damnation, blast and butcher's teeth!” he bellowed, snapping his pencil. “Curse this wretched broken body of mine, can't it let my mind alone?”

Three and a quarter seconds passed. Babbage slept like a kipper.

000011

“Is there anything in my diary today, Mrs Front?” asked Babbage the following morning.

“One visitor...” his housekeeper replied in an uncharacteristically coy fashion.

“Eh? Are you quite sure about that?” asked Babbage, his face a picture of perplexity (only it wasn't a picture really, but his actual face... well, a fictional actual face, I suppose, but that's still considerably more of a face than a metaphorical one).

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"Quite sure" said Mrs Front whilst fiddling nervously with the strings of her apron.

"Well, it's the first I've heard of it," said Babbage grimly. "Out with it, then. Who should I be expecting to interrupt my valuable work today?"

"Dr Glass-Bandit," said Mrs Front as quietly as she dared to. Babbage inflated like an outraged dirigible.

"You asked a physician to visit my home? My home, without *my* permission!" he exploded. He would have gone on, no doubt, had he not succumbed to the perpetual tickle in his diseased throat and crumpled into a heap of nasty, wet coughing.

"I felt it my duty, Mr Babbage," said Mrs Front hurriedly. "You've been so terribly ill of late, you see..."

"And what of it?" snapped Babbage. "Can a gentleman not be ill without his damnable housekeeper continually interfering? Can a gentleman not deal with his own malfunctionings in his own time and, more to the point, his own method? Can a gentleman not simply work and rest in peace?"

"I just thought it best for a gen-, er, for you to seek a professional opinion..." Mrs Front said to the carpet.

"The only opinion I need ever seek is my own, Mrs Front. Doctors are all impudent upstarts, every last damn one of them!" declared her enraged employer. "They poke you and prod you and tell you to 'get some rest' then have the damned temerity to charge you eight shillings for the privilege! They know nothing of real science. They

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poke about in other people's bodies, slice up corpses, make up silly names for head colds and call it progress! Charlatans and quacks the lot of 'em. I've no time for doctors, Mrs Front. No time at all. Besides which, I'm getting better of my own accord. My cough's almost completely... Damn."

"What is it, Mr Babbage?"

"My wrist is leaking."

"Oh dear," said Mrs Front. "Not again."

000100

As Mrs Front mopped up the last flecks of Babbage's wrist-foam the house-bell rang. Mrs Front scuttled off to answer it, allowing Babbage a moment to prepare himself for the coming ordeal. As Mrs Front ushered Dr Glass-Bandit into the drawing room, Babbage let out a heavy sigh. Dr Glass-Bandit was a lean, well-dressed gentleman in his early thirties. Babbage chose to dislike him there and then.

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"Ah, Mr Babbage! It is an honour to meet you at long last!" exclaimed the young doctor.

"No it isn't," said Babbage matter-of-factly.

"I see. Well, let us get down to the matter at hand, shall we? First of all, sir, I should like you to take your shoes off."

Babbage screwed his eyes into dark knots of abject disapproval. "Perhaps you should, my dear doctor. I, on the other hand, should not."

"Your preferences in this matter are somewhat immaterial, Mr Babbage. I have made a solemn promise to your dear housekeeper that I shall subject you to a most thorough medical examination and, if at all possible, supply you with a proper diagnosis for your ailments. I intend to keep that

promise. Now, kindly take off your shoes or I shall be forced to employ the use of a shoe-horn."

"I thought those were for getting shoes on?"

"Not exclusively, Mr Babbage, not exclusively," said Dr Glass-Bandit quietly. "Especially not medical ones," he added with a menacing smirk.

"I see," said Babbage begrudgingly. Muttering a few well-chosen oaths and obscenities and wheezing with the sheer effort of it, Babbage eventually extracted his feet from their stuffy leather tombs.

"I'll need you to take your socks off as well," said Dr Glass-Bandit with a veneer of apology.

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"You need no such thing, sir!" Babbage ejaculated.

"If you wish me to examine you properly..."

"I wish nothing of kind!"

"In which case, I shall have to inform poor Mrs Front that you simply refused to cooperate. I observe she is sweeping at the moment... My, she's a deft hand with a broom, is she not, Mr Babbage? Just imagine the sort of damage a well-built woman like Mrs Front could inflict with an implement like that, were someone to upset her sufficiently."

"Very well. Have it your way, *doctor*." Babbage sighed resignedly. He leant forwards and cautiously peeled off his hole-ridden socks.

"Very good. And now the under-socks, please?"

This, it seemed to Babbage, was Going Too Far. "Good God, man!" he spluttered splenetically. "Do you want me to catch my death?"

"I fear you may have already done so, sir, now take your under-socks off, *please!*" Dr Glass-Bandit said through gritted teeth.

Babbage eventually relented, albeit under considerable duress. Dr Glass-Bandit regarded his patient's feet with a quizzical gaze, and clicked his tongue thoughtfully. "Mr Babbage," he said at last, "just how many layers of clothing are you wearing on your feet, exactly?"

"Enough," Babbage replied gruffly. "Two additional pairs of woollen under-socks, a

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pair of Winter Jeffries, a couple of foot-gloves and a reversible gardening turt on my left one on account of it suffering terribly at this time of year. It tends to go all crumbly if I don't."

"Well, they'll all have to come off. I need to examine your feet, sir. Properly."

"...All of them?"

"All of them."

With some considerable effort on both their parts, Babbage's feet were finally exposed. The smell alone was enough to indicate that something wasn't quite right with them. Though largely reminiscent of rotting hake, there were subtler components that completed the aroma: furniture polish, quicklime, horse gum, school corridors, organ recitals, piss. Dr Glass-Bandit

desperately fought the urge to share his breakfast with the carpet, clapped a handkerchief over his face and went in for a closer look.

The feet were green. Not very green, perhaps, as green things go. In a greenest green thing tournament, Babbage's feet would be lucky to make it past the qualifiers, but when compared to the foot of a typical human being such as the ones which, in all probability, are on the ends of your legs, there was an unmistakable greenness to them, especially around the toes. This greenness perturbed Dr Glass-Bandit, and he decided to investigate the matter further.

"Could you pop your feet up on that stool for me, please? Yes, that's the way." The doctor reached about in his bag and

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produced the tiniest hammer Babbage had ever seen - no bigger than his thumb, and fashioned from lacquered pine. Dr Glass-Bandit took it gently betwixt his forefinger and thumb and tapped it gently on the tip of Babbage's right middle toe.

"Did that hurt at all?"

"No. Not in the slightest."

"What if I do this?" He tapped the toe again, a fraction harder.

"Nope."

"Well, did it tickle, perhaps?"

"No."

"Does it feel hotter?"

"No."

"Colder?"

"No."

"Did it provoke a sense of anguish, confusion or mild outrage?"

"I doubt it."

"Tell me, Mr Babbage. When was the last time you bathed your feet?"

"February."

"And did you notice, whilst performing that task, anything unusual or unexpected?"

"A squirrel gave me a funny look."

"Anything unusual with your feet, I mean."

"Oh right. No, nothing I can recall. A little flaking, a few pops and squeaks, but nothing out of the ordinary."

"Hmm. The feet are, I find, an excellent indicator of a gentleman's overall health, and

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judging by yours, Mr Babbage, I'm afraid to say that you are in pretty bad shape. I don't know for certain, or indeed at all, which of the many potential afflictions or maladies you may be suffering from, but I must declare that your symptoms are fascinating. Absolutely fascinating. I'll pop back in a week or two once I've looked a few things up. With any luck by that point I'll have a much clearer idea of what you may have come down with. Until then, I'd advise you to lay off any strenuous activities such as lifting, bending, juggling and so on, get plenty of sunlight and fresh air, lots of rest, and to drink at least one pint of whisky a fortnight. Good stuff, whisky. Toughens the lungs. Oh, and do make sure your tobacco's nice and fresh, won't you? Nothing damages a man's constitution quite like old tobacco."

"Is that all?"

"Not quite. I believe you owe me eight shillings."

The painful act of paying a man for his uninvited opinion dealt with, Babbage was left alone once more in his drawing room, surrounded by his thoughts. He wiggled his toes for a moment, and sniffed deeply. Finally, he set about ensconcing his feet once more in layer upon layer of protective footwear and imagined all the while of a machine that could count.

000101

A week passed. Babbage's drawings had begun to take shape, but he felt as though the plans grew further away from completion with every stroke of his pencil. He was also acutely aware of just how fast the disease was progressing. His mouth was now permanently dry, the skin around his knees and ankles was rapidly flaking and his hair was coming away by the handful.

Food was also becoming a serious problem for Babbage. He began to compile a list of foodstuffs which usually remained in his stomach long enough for him to properly

digest them. After a whole month of trial and error it read as follows:

1. Cold meat
2. Crumpets
3. Blancmange

Permanently rejected foodstuffs included salmon, kidneys, oxtail soup, poached eggs, marmalade, bacon, gruel, stewed plums, beef wellington, rabbit and trout pie, jelly, Bakewell tart, caviar and dumplings. He'd even tried them all separately, but to no avail. Almost every substance deemed fit for consumption by an Englishman seemed unsuited to Babbage's increasingly temperamental digestive system - a particularly harrowing incident with a Cumberland

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sausage left poor Mrs Front scrubbing the walls for several hours with the aid of a wire brush. Babbage had never cared deeply for food, and secretly welcomed his increasingly limited dietary options. The less time he spent considering what to dine on, the more time he could devote to his last great act.

000110

Babbage had no idea what time it was. Probably night, as the silence was immense. He had spent all his waking hours for weeks now hunched over his sprawling plans for the analytical engine. Every available surface – tables, serving trolleys, even the floor – was now littered with heaps of paper. His room was an ocean of diagrams, calculations and notes. Raw mathematics was strewn in all directions as Babbage continued to mine his brain for the solutions to problems that no one else so much as knew existed. He poured himself a fortifying glass of claret (one of the few beverages which remained

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unimpeded by his delicate constitution) and coughed. Oh dear, he thought, this shall not end well.

Babbage began to splutter and gasp his way through the cough but soon it became apparent to him there was no end in sight. Each dry, wheezing spasm of his throat simply brought about the next. Heaving, gasping, rasping, groaning, tears of exertion trickling down his russet cheeks. There he sat, shaking and spluttering, a prisoner to the endless cough.

After what seemed like days of incessant hacking, Babbage finally felt something stir in the back of his throat. It felt like a glob of phlegm, only bigger. Much bigger. And firmer. And hairier. And... flatter? Each little cough brought the puzzling object further up

his windpipe. His naturally crimson complexion turned plum-purple with the effort of dislodging whatever was lurking deep in his neck. At long last, with one final triumphant bellowing heave, the thing emerged.

It was small, white and furry. It had a big, wide head, with two long, pointy ears, tiny black eyes and a little X for a nose. It was also completely two-dimensional. It sat on Babbage's lap, casually wiped away the vile coating of mucus that clung to its furry surface, stared at him with its blank, soulless eyes and sniffed.

"Hallo," it said, in a vaguely Dutch accent.

"Hello," replied Babbage, too flabbergasted to ignore it.

"My name is Jiffy," said the little creature. Its simple features disturbed Babbage. It

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looked as though it had been drawn by a child. A generous person might have suggested it was a rabbit. It didn't have a mouth.

"Hello Jiffy," Babbage murmured, utterly bewildered and transfixed by the strange entity on his lap. "What were you doing in my throat?" he managed at last. It was a reasonable question, and it received a reasonable answer:

"I don't know. What's a throat?"

"It's what you were in just now."

"Oh. I see. I was sitting in it."

"Ah. Why?"

Jiffy scrunched up his eyes and thought for a bit. "I don't know" he said at last, with a

bright little smile. "What's your name, mister?"

"Babbage," said Babbage. "Charles Babbage."

"That's a stupid name," said Jiffy. "I like you. You're a funny colour. Where are we? What's an analytical engine?"

"What did you say?" Babbage hissed.

"I don't know. What's an analytical engine?"

"How... how did you...?"

"I don't know. Is it like a spoon? Or a forest, perhaps?"

"But I've never... I mean, I didn't mention the analytical engine, did I?"

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"No you didn't. I did. You thought about it, though. Where are we? I'm hungry."

"Hush a moment, friend. Do you mean to tell me that you can read my thoughts?"

"I don't know. Do I mean to tell you that?"

"I can't see how else you could know what I was thinking."

"Oh. I see. You should probably use a biffen spoke in the secondary memory wheel in place of a prolaptive guntry. It'll prevent the top system jamming if you accidentally input a heaped thread."

Babbage blinked, rifled through his notes and frantically jotted down some brief calculations.

"My God... You're right, it would! How could you possibly have known that?"

Jiffy twitched. "I don't know," he said.

And thus blossomed the first true friendship that Babbage had shared with any living thing since the passing of his wife many years ago. In Jiffy he saw much of himself – an inquisitive nature that knew no boundaries, an implicit understanding of mathematics and modern mechanics, and a deep sense of why the world must turn.

Jiffy liked Babbage because he fed him biscuits and had funny hair. He was also fascinated by the analytical engine, whatever it was. He could see it just as Babbage could – a computing behemoth, all shiny and tall. He could smell how it ticked and taste how it thought. He instinctively knew what a powerful thing an analytical engine must be. He would make it his goal to guide this great

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man and aid him in his quest to build a machine that was all-but impossible. Together, they would change the world in order to keep it turning. Together they would build the world's first computer.

000111

The following morning Dr Glass-Bandit returned with the fruits of his research. "Ah, Mr Babbage!" he beamed, shaking his patient firmly by the hand, then discretely disposing of the moistened glove in a waste paper basket which was otherwise empty, due to Babbage's refusal to engage with the concept of 'waste paper'.

"What is it, Glass-Bandit?" Babbage sighed deliberately. "Can't you see I'm in the middle of a major development in mankind's relationship with the mathematical sciences?"

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"Ah, well... I, er... I'll cut to chase then, shall I?" the doctor stammered, fiddling uncomfortably with the brim of his hat.

"I think you'd better" Babbage said without the slightest attempt to disguise his threatening tone.

"Er, right. Well. After our last consultation I made a point of liaising with several of my colleagues over at the Royal College of Physicians to see if they could shed any light on your condition. We studied my notes carefully, cross-referenced them with various textbooks and medical journals to see if your symptoms matched with any recorded exotic or uncommon ailments - mellifula, penge, hyperbolic goatism, leptospeptic theptep-tinitis, Huelsenbeck's Malady, fondled kidneys, the clutch, turkey stammer,

lymphatic rodhole meanderism, bell-neck,
Crimean bee syphilis, haberdasher's thumb,
grey sloddens, gerrymandering of the face or
bladder, clam separation, abbey crunch,
quoits, moon fever, old speckled hen,
automatic gob fettering, tedious listitis, dog
plasma, lettrist caravan, obstruction of the
upper cremyll, bovine chunters, autonomous
wig threshing- I say, are you all right, Mr
Babbage?"

Babbage was not all right. His eyes had
rolled back, his nose was bleeding and his
knees were emitting an involuntary low-
pitched whine. Dr Glass-Bandit hurriedly
jotted down a few notes then rushed to his
patient's aid. Whilst scrabbling about in his
bag for noseplugs and bracken he continued
with his discourse.

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"Well, anyway... You can still hear me can't you, old boy?"

"Gnh."

"Right. Well, anyway, the thing is, to put it bluntly... buggered if I know. My colleagues and I were utterly stumped by the curious cocktail of symptoms that you seem to be playing host to. Chew this bracken, sir. Can you chew?"

"Gnh."

"Jolly good. As I say, I'm afraid we've simply no idea what's going on in that body of yours and it's probably reasonable to presume that there are a fair few separate ailments all manifesting themselves at once, combining to cause even more symptoms in the process, many of which, to be utterly candid with you for a moment Mr Babbage,

we have simply never encountered before and appear to be completely unrecorded in any reputable publications. No, don't swallow it! How are you feeling?"

"Tetchy."

Dr Glass-Bandit regarded Babbage's face, which had returned to a state of crumpled, scowling, bloodstained normality.

"I wish I were the bearer of happier news, sir," said Dr Glass-Bandit quietly.

"No matter."

There was a pause.

"Where's the rest?" said Babbage at last.

"I'm sorry?"

"You're not done, are you? What else have you to tell me?"

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"I... Well, this is only a rough estimate and I wouldn't wish you to be unduly worried but... I fear you may have to prepare for the worst, sir."

"Talk plainly or not at all, man!" grunted Babbage.

"It is my considered opinion as a medical professional that you have about three months left to live, Mr Babbage. Six at the most."

"Excellent!"

"I-I'm sorry?"

"Three months is plenty! More than enough time to complete my work on the engine," Babbage beamed, then added with a chuckle, "D'you know, you had me worried

for a moment, old boy? I thought you were about to tell me I'd gone mad!"

"Well why on earth should I do that?" said Dr Glass-Bandit with a frown. "Your physical ailments might be numerous and severe, Mr Babbage, but I am happy to report that I have observed no reduction in your mental faculties whatsoever."

"Ah well, you know how it is... Mrs Front's been fussing me rather more than usual ever since Jiffy arrived," said Babbage in a low voice, glancing about nervously.

"I see," said Dr Glass-Bandit, though in truth he did not see.

Babbage turned to Jiffy, who was perched on a nearby bookcase, and smiled broadly at him. "Hear that, Jiffy? Our esteemed friend Dr Glass-Bandit says I'm not mad after all!"

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“...Yes,” said Dr Glass-Bandit cautiously.
“I'll leave my invoice with Mrs Front, shall I?”

Jiffy stifled a giggle.

001000

It seemed only right for Charles Babbage to let his fellows at the Royal Society know of his plans to revolutionise the world of mathematics, especially now that thanks to Jiffy's expert guidance he was quite sure he was onto a winner. All the same, Babbage did not relish the prospect of delivering his lecture. He was not a natural speaker and, as he approached the Royal Society's buildings in Carlton House Terrace, the thought of his imminent public appearance coupled with the motion of the carriage made him feel even sicker than usual.

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"I'm really not sure about this, Jiffy," he mumbled to his flat, Dutch companion, who was seated quietly upon his shoulder and staring vacantly out of the carriage window.

Jiffy cocked his head and blinked twice. "Why not?"

"I'm ill-prepared. I realise we were up all night writing these damn notes, but I worry it lacks the necessary... oomph. And regardless, am I really physically up to the task of delivering such a lecture at all? What if I'm sick on my notes, for example? I've already coughed up two lumps of lung salt this morning and my nose squeaks every time I look up. Ugh... it's wretched, Jiffy. I feel utterly, utterly wretched."

"Yes," said Jiffy absent-mindedly. "You'll manage. If you get stuck I'll tell you what to say. Oh, a cloud!"

"Really, Jiffy? You'd do that for me?" said Babbage delightedly. "That's awfully good of you."

Jiffy said nothing, and continued to stare blankly out of the window.

Despite Jiffy's words of comfort, Babbage still felt the dread rattling through his bones. The only aspect of the whole affair he anticipated with anything other than utter terror was the chance to use the Royal Society's notoriously decadent toilets.

As soon as he arrived at the establishment he made his excuses to the staff and colleagues who littered the entrance hall and scuttled off through the towering double-

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doors that lead to the aforementioned conveniences. He had been saving up all morning, as was his custom.

At once his ears were caressed by the careful oscillations of a piano quintet. The cellist smiled serenely at him as he strode past along the polished marble tiles, and selected a cigar from a rack placed conveniently on the wall beside them. A small boy sporting a garish waistcoat came scurrying up, bowed, curtsied, bowed again then hurriedly struck a match on his sandpapered trousers. Babbage bent down to light his cigar, coughed a little and splattered the unfortunate match-boy's face with a mixture of phlegm, blood and partially digested crumpets. The boy was careful not to flinch and made sure he could not be of

any further service before retiring to the nearest sink to wash his face.

Babbage puffed thoughtfully on his cigar and surveyed the many cubicles that stretched out along the sprawling, corridor-like room. Each had been individually designed and constructed with particular requirements in mind. There were extremely wide cubicles with large sturdy toilets for gentlemen of excessive build, cubicles filled with powerful aromatic scents to mask the potential excesses of one's discharge and thus spare the olfactory system needless offence, cubicles manned by no less than five fully trained attendants, with whose invaluable assistance one may set about one's bodily transactions without any unnecessary strain or thought, leaving oneself free to concentrate on matters of greater

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import, cubicles containing nothing but a crude hollow in a box of dirt, for the adventurous gentleman who has grown accustomed to the simple ways of life as practised by the savages they have encountered during their travels, cubicles of wood, of glass, of leather and cast-iron, cubicles populated by women and bees, cubicles equipped with miniature libraries, puppet theatres, chess boards, herb gardens, cubicles with acoustics to rival a concert hall, for men who like to sing whilst shitting, in short, the toilets of the Royal Society had cubicles to cater for every conceivable scatological whim or fancy.

In the end, such was Babbage's state of urgency, that he simply opted for the cubicle closest to him. It was full of mirrors and the

toilet was so tall that he needed to employ the aid of a stepladder to reach it.

Bowels emptied and nerves steadied (with aid of a scotch from the drinks cabinet situated conveniently next to the sink), Babbage was escorted by a fully trained escortier out into the brightly lit auditorium. The moment he took up his position behind the lectern he was struck in the face with a wet sponge. Ah, he thought to himself, it's going to be one of *those* lectures, is it? He heard some adolescent sniggering from the back rows and looked up to see Charles Darwin readying himself with a ripe tomato and a catapult. With a casual duck Babbage avoided the brace of cabbages which came sailing over his hat, and cleared his throat

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"Get on with it!" yelled Lord Kelvin, prompting a ripple of good-natured jeering.

"Gentlemen... and ladies-" Babbage began, prompting a barrage of laughter from the assembled academics. Babbage considered the response to be most gratifying. "Always open with a joke," Herschel had said to him once whilst they were up at Cambridge together – a sound piece of advice that had served him well over the years. "Gentlemen," he continued, "the dawn of a new era is upon us. Doubtless you have heard such bold claims scores of times throughout your academic careers, but I assure you gentlemen, I am deadly serious when I say, once more that the dawn of a new era *is* upon us. Welcome, gentlemen, to the age of machines! Already we have devised automatic mechanisms to sow our seeds, bathe

our children, write our novels and place small objects adjacent to one another. These are all, without exception, fine and worthwhile achievements. Yet, my learned friends, I call on you now to imagine something far greater than all these technological advances combined. I want you to imagine *a machine that can count!*"

Gasps and murmurs crackled through the auditorium.

"A machine, furthermore, that can process the most challenging of calculative tasks. A machine that could, if correctly instructed and operated, perform mathematical feats that would take a well-schooled gentlemen more than three hours to complete in a matter of mere seconds! I ask you, could you ever conceive of such a device?"

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The heckling and missiles had stopped abruptly. Babbage had gripped the minds of his peers like pigs in a pig-vice; he held them captive with nothing but an idea. This is what science is all about, he thought. This is why we are here. Time to deliver the killer blow. Or at least it would have been, had his leg not fallen off.

Babbage didn't notice the missing limb at first. Such was the tightness with which he gripped the lectern that he remained fully perpendicular for several seconds. He was aware of a somewhat draughty sensation around his upper thigh, but given his manifold other complaints that did little to worry him. It was only when he started to relax his grip that he found himself one leg too few and took the only appropriate course

of action following such a discovery. He fell over.

At first this prompted nothing but an explosion of laughter from his boisterous audience. The assembled scientists were in an excitable mood as it was, giddy with thoughts and mischief in their veins. Their instincts told them to appreciate a little impromptu slapstick as simply part of the fun, despite the admittedly atypical context in which it was delivered. It was therefore a good couple of minutes before the laughter began to ebb away and one of the learned men felt inclined to pop round the back of the lectern and see what Babbage was up to.

The leg, it turned out, had simply dropped off, rather like a rotten branch from an old dead tree. In the process of falling Babbage

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had struck his head quite severely on the corner of the wooden lectern and was already unconscious by the time he'd hit the floor.

Jiffy had watched this spectacle quietly from the back of the auditorium, apparently unmoved or merely unwilling intervene. The nearest he came to outwardly reacting was a momentary twitch of his two-dimensional nose.

001001

The matron was most unhelpful. She had confiscated Babbage's notebooks and pencils on the grounds that he "couldn't possibly rest amongst such fripperies and distractions". This had resulted in a loud and unpleasant altercation in which Babbage had compared the matron to a toad, a witch and Attila the Hun. The matron had remained impassive and stoical throughout and, whilst locking the items away in his suitcase, informed him in as patronising a tone as she could muster that "you may have them back when you are well, Mr Babbage".

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A few hours later a doctor, even younger and cockier than Dr Glass-Bandit, strode in, poked his neck, tapped his chest, took his temperature, peered under the bedclothes to examine his stump, noted that Babbage had begun to sprout bassoons from his armpits, shrugged apologetically and told him to get some rest. Afterwards, a staff nurse informed him that he could probably leave as soon as the patient with the spare crutch had died.

Despite his insistences, Babbage's meat was served to him warm and taken away before it had had a chance to cool down. On the one occasion Babbage attempted to eat his meat warm his tongue swelled to the size of a child's shoe and his appendix burst.

Each night Babbage lay awake and sober, absorbing the screams and gargling of his

fellow patients. The cold, dark, cloying fingers of night gripped his neck and poked around in his ears, just to annoy him. For a man used to a life more or less free from interruptions, cocooned within the tranquil leather temple of his study, life in the hospital was beyond torture. A daily routine of inedible food, shrieking neighbours, unsolicited pillow fluffing and a complete absence of pencils soon wore Babbage down to a state of abject desperation.

After nearly three weeks of this agony, during a particularly frustrating night in which Babbage's attempts to sleep were routinely thwarted by the gentleman in the bed opposite sneezing like an exploding terrier once every six minutes, Babbage finally resolved to take action. He absent-mindedly fiddled with his bassoons (which

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were by now about ready to drop off) and quickly began to formulate a plan. The time had come for him to escape the confines of his grey, sickening prison before it truly killed him. With considerable effort he hauled himself out of his damp, cold bed and hopped woozily over to the exit.

“Dear me, Mr Babbage,” said the matron with an unapologetic sneer, “did you really think it would be that easy?” Taking him roughly by the arm, the matron dragged the sick, old man forcibly back to his bed. With a heavy sigh, the matron expressed her disappointment at Babbage's apparent naivety whilst chaining him to the mattress.

001010

Later that week Jiffy paid his friend a visit.

"Are you any good with padlocks, Jiffy?" asked Babbage desperately.

"No," said Jiffy. "Where are we?"

"Hospital, Jiffy," said Babbage. "It's where they put people who are going to die to keep them from troubling all the healthy folk."

"Oh," said Jiffy. "It's very nice, isn't it?"

"No," said Babbage. "No, it is not."

"That's what I meant to say," said Jiffy quickly. He sniffed at the pile of bassoons

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next to Babbage's bed (he was sprouting them with considerable regularity now) and blinked slowly. "When are we going to build an analytical engine?" he asked abruptly.

"My poor Jiffy," Babbage sighed, stroking his companion's two-dimensional ears affectionately, "I doubt we shall ever complete our grand vision now. I have been sentenced to life as an invalid, with all its moribund trappings. Our dream lies dormant until I find a suitable method of escape from this wretched institution."

"Oh I see," said Jiffy with a distracted sniff. "Well, you should probably do that then," he added helpfully.

"I don't see how I can, old boy," said Babbage despairingly.

“Well... well, what I'd do is I'd probably eat up all the chains that were sticking me to the bed and then grab that funny stick with all the knobs on it and hit that pretty lady's nice face with it and keep on hitting her so it makes her sleepy and then use it as a crutch (what's a crutch?) and run away all very very fast and froth a bit and shout funny things so everyone thinks I'm mad and doesn't want to touch me in case then they get mad as well and keep on running and running and then hide somewhere such as in a room or under a bush or round the back of a fire station or inside a book or somewhere until everyone stops caring and looking for me and then go home and make an analytical engine but that's just what I'd do I think...” said Jiffy.

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"A wonderful plan, Jiffy," said Babbage, "were it not for the fact that I cannot eat chains."

"Oh," said Jiffy, looking momentarily crestfallen. "That's a pity. If it was me then I'd just eat the chains but you can't eat the chains so that's sad then, isn't it?" he explained.

"Hang about..." said Babbage, realisation spreading across his face like margarine on a teacake. "Do you mean to tell me you can eat these chains, Jiffy?"

"I don't know."

"Try one."

Jiffy tried one. He cautiously shaved off a few curls of the dense iron chain with his teeth and let them dissolve on his tongue. "It

tastes like butterscotch," he concluded. Babbage waited. Jiffy looked at a plant.

"Well don't stop there, man!" Babbage exclaimed with desperation, "eat the damn chains, already!"

"But I don't like butterscotch," Jiffy whined.

"If you don't eat the chains then there'll be no analytical engine," Babbage intoned in the manner of a stern but well-meaning mother.

It did the trick. Jiffy liked no analytical engine even less than he liked butterscotch. He fell upon the chains like a starved rat, tearing off great hunks of rusty iron, gulping down several links at a time. In mere seconds Babbage's limbs were as free as daisies. He shot out an arm and grasped the nearest

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bassoon, swung his legs out of the bed and limped urgently across the ward, working up a serviceable froth as he went.

“Clod filter!” Babbage cried at the staff nurse, flecking her face with foamy spit. He refrained from hitting her round the head with a bassoon as Jiffy had suggested, opting instead to merely growl and brandish the instrument in a vaguely threatening manner as he picked up his suitcase and hobbled out of the building.

The air in the hospital grounds was delightful. It was cold, sweet, mid-March air which seemed, to Babbage at any rate, to fizz with the anticipation of progress. Trees stood up. Birds sang like people. Babbage took a deep, satisfied breath, coughed, doubled-up and threw up one of his kidneys. “Come,

Edwin Birch

Jiffy" he muttered hoarsely, dabbing the blood and bile from his lips with an old, crusty handkerchief, "Let us take our leave of this wretched place. We have an engine to build!"

001011

It was with frail and nervous hands that Mrs Front held the envelope flecked with brown blood. It was addressed to her – the first personal communication she had received since dear Mr Front had passed away some fourteen years previously. She felt certain that an equally grim message awaited her within this envelope now and her fingers were most reluctant to let her brain find out. She could barely grip the letter opener as she made a rough incision across the top.

The paper was crumpled, stained and had a series of incomprehensible sums scribbled

Edwin Birch

on the back in a familiar hand. Mrs Front sat upon the kitchen stool, peered through her flimsy spectacles and read:

14th March 1851

Dear Mrs Front,

I sincerely hope this letter finds both you and my dear home well. I have escaped from the hospital for it was a ghastly and most inconvenient place in which to conduct my affairs. They took away my pencils and claimed there was little else they could do. Whilst the physicians may be content to do little, I most certainly am not.

I have yet to grow a new leg, but until then I have a good supply of

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bassoons which seem to do just as well when bound to the stump with a piece of cloth or twine.

Jiffy has found a splendid location for us to undertake the construction of the analytical engine without fear of being disturbed or discovered by any government agents, jealous rivals or general ne'er-do-wells. Naturally, I cannot disclose its whereabouts, even to a trustworthy soul such as yourself.

I shall return to the homestead once my work is complete.

Yours sincerely,

C. Babbage.

PS – If I have a dog, please feed it.

Edwin Birch

Mrs Front folded away the letter and tucked it into an apron pocket. She glanced at the ghostly house with a sigh. "It'll be the death of him," she said to no one in particular.

001100

“Well, Jiffy, I must say you've outdone yourself!” Babbage proclaimed, surveying his new surroundings with obvious approval. Outwardly, it had the appearance of a typical London terraced townhouse, but behind its narrow doorway lay an expansive workshop stuffed with more cogs, pistons, levers and extraneous brass flaps than Babbage had ever dared to dream of.

“Engine,” said Jiffy quietly. “It'll be like the moon only clever.”

001101

Reader, have you ever built an analytical engine? No, I thought as much. How then, to convey the task which Mr Babbage and his two-dimensional companion were now undertaking?

Imagine, if you will, a piece of paper. Flat. Rectangular. Blank. Got that? Now pick up a pen. No, an imaginary one will do. That's it. Right then, write your name at the top. Yes, and the date. Oh wait, it's run out of ink. Have you got another pen? No, of course I don't have one, I'm writing this on a computer like everyone else. Oh wait, there's

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one just here. Yes, I suppose you can have it, just so long as you promise to give it back to me when you're done with it. Right, now draw a piece of paper on your piece of paper. That's it. Now draw a picture on your picture of a piece of paper. It doesn't have to be anything special. Just a house or a cat or a cucumber or something. Anything will do. Finished? Good. Now screw the paper up and toss it in the bin, because this metaphor was clearly doomed from the outset. Let's try again.

Imagine you're in a running race, but no one's invented legs yet. The starter pistol fires, but instead of going "BANG!" it makes a noise a bit like a bowling ball landing on a large block of cheddar. Imagine me telling you to forget I just wrote that. Bloody hell, this is tricky, isn't it?

Imagine a satellite orbiting some distant planet. It has five prongs, each ending in a question. The first question is "Who are you?". The second question is "Why am I doing this?". The third question is a secret. The fourth question is imaginary, even in the context of this already imagined scenario. The fifth question is "No, seriously, why the balls am I doing this?". No, wait... No.

Right. Imagine a blue whale swallowing a glove. No, imagine a turnstile complaining to OFCOM. Wait! Imagine a diplomat made of towels. Or better still, imagine the opposite of Coventry. Imagine a sad cloud, an abandoned octopus, a shed full of hypothetical bus tickets. No, ignore all that.

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Imagine a universe of incoherent noise being rammed into a copper tube, backwards.

Reader, some things are beyond imagination. Some things cannot be pinned down by words. Some things are beyond us all.

001110

Our heroes toiled. They swore. They bashed. They screwed. They argued. They agreed. They had a rest, then they built an analytical engine. It was huge and precarious, brilliant and preposterous – a mighty monstrosity of mechanics, mathematics and hope.

“How will we test it?” Babbage asked, wiping away the sweat and grease from his forehead with a rag covered in sweat and grease. “I think I've forgotten how it works.”

“We need a test pilot,” Jiffy declared resolutely. “It must be small enough to sit in

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that seat," he added, pointing to a tiny wooden chair surrounded by ominous-looking levers and buttons in the centre of the engine.

"How about you, Jiffy?" asked Babbage.

"No," said Jiffy flatly. "I'm too clever. A pigeon would be best."

"Where on earth can we find a pigeon in London?" asked Babbage. "Oh," he added, immediately spotting one perched on a nearby windowsill. The bird fixed Babbage with an utterly vacant stare and cooed a bit. Babbage opened the window and stuck an arm out to grab it, but the bird flew off in a startled flurry of feathers. "Damnable bird," said Babbage under his breath. "There must be a better way... What food do we have, Jiffy?"

"Meat, mostly," said Jiffy. "There's some blancmange, I think?"

"Do pigeons like meat?"

"No," said Jiffy.

"Well, it had better be the blancmange then," said Babbage. "Hand it over, Jiffy." Jiffy scuttled across the room with a plateful of half-eaten blancmange. It jiggled obscenely. There was a fly on it.

Babbage placed the blancmange cautiously on the windowsill and waited. For thirty minutes they sat there, watching intently as the undulating dessert settled and the fly sank helplessly into its treacherous, pink innards. Babbage sighed as he felt the last of his hair fall out. Jiffy thought about dancing.

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Suddenly, they heard the unmistakable creaking of a pigeon's wings. The bird settled clumsily onto the windowsill and began to lap greedily at the half-eaten blancmange. "Quick!" hissed Babbage. "Now's our chance! Where did you put the chloroform, Jiffy?"

Reader, have you ever drugged a pigeon? No, I thought as much. I attempted it myself whilst conducting some preliminary research for this fiction, and it turned out to be a lot trickier than I had originally anticipated. Jiffy and Babbage also encountered a variety of difficulties including (but not limited to) approaching the bird without it noticing, knowing which bit of a pigeon is normally used for breathing in air (and thus, presumably, fumes) and restraining the bird long enough to apply the cloth to the

appropriate part of its anatomy. Thus, having unsurprisingly failed to ply the bird with pink desserts and overcome it with fumes, Babbage and Jiffy resolved to catch their prey by other means.

Science and serendipity often go hand in hand. Indeed, rumours abound that they may even be 'going steady' these days. During the occasional periods of rest and reflection between work on the analytical engine, Babbage had experimented with his bassoons in order to find a use for them other than that of a makeshift leg. After a great deal of trial and error he had hit upon the notion of using them as though they were musical instruments by blowing through one end and fiddling with the fiddly bits. In no time at all he was producing notes, sometimes in a logical or attractive order. During this process

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he had accidentally discovered that by modulating the tones of his instrument in a certain way he could produce a sound not entirely dissimilar to that of a pigeon in a state of distress and/or physical discomfort. Now, a mere three days after this seemingly unremarkable discovery, he had found a practical application for the technique. If only Mr Newton had been so swift to capitalise on his invention of Gravity, he thought, before moistening his lips, plucking a fresh bassoon from his armpit and blowing.

Barely a minute of cacophonous honking later, the pigeon came tumbling in through the open window to establish the exact nature of its friend's apparent misfortune, only to be confronted with the sight of Jiffy grinning maliciously and stuffing a brown paper bag over its terrified head.

The unfortunate bird was subsequently deposited into the pilot's chair and held down with several small leather straps, before finally having the bag removed and replaced by some rather fetching aviator goggles. They also supplied it with a pair of sturdy leather boots.

"Now, what we would like you to do is really very simple," said Babbage in as comforting a tone as he could manage. "We have built this machine to count for us. You do not need to tell it the answers, simply supply it with the questions. Do you understand?"

"What is happening, please?" cooed the pigeon politely.

"He says yes," Jiffy translated.

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"Er, right," said Babbage. "Now, can you ask the machine what two plus two is, please?"

"I don't understand. What is happening, please?" said the pigeon.

"The pigeon says it would be delighted to," said Jiffy.

The pigeon's eyes darted about from button to button and lever to lever in the control centre. Nothing was labelled, but then again the pigeon couldn't read, so it would hardly have made much difference. It looked back at Babbage with pleading, terrified eyes. "Can I go, please?" it said. "I have a wife, you see."

"Just do whatever feels natural," said Babbage, smiling broadly at the distressed pigeon. He was becoming increasingly aware

that he had absolutely no idea how his machine actually worked. If it worked at all, that is.

The pigeon tentatively tapped at a couple of buttons and experimentally twiddled a dial. Suddenly, the engine lurched into life. The mechanical arms began to pump, the cogs began to grind, the switches switched, the biffen spokes biffened and the little flag at the top unfurled, proclaiming proudly “YES”.

Babbage and Jiffy whooped and danced. It was all terribly exciting.

The inking pads dabbed politely at a thin scroll of paper and millimetre by millimetre the engine's first words emerged. The analytical engine had produced an answer:

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+++IN: 2+2 }

+++OUT: =4 }

“Huzzah!” cried Babbage, leaping about the workshop and tossing Jiffy up in the air delightedly. “It works! It works! A machine that can count! I knew it would work! I never doubted you, Jiffy! I never doubted myself! It's a triumph! It's a-glaarrk!”

He dropped Jiffy. His hands twitched. His eyes rolled back. His nostrils flared. His skin became oily. A fresh pink wafer fell from his lips.

“Mr Babbage?” said Jiffy.

“Eh?” said Babbage, suddenly snapping back to reality.

"Oh. You're still alive then," said Jiffy ambiguously.

"Er, yes. Yes, I am. I think," said Babbage quietly. "Sorry, where were we?"

"Alpha testing," said Jiffy. "We made a thing." He pointed at the analytical engine, by way of demonstration.

"Yes, of course," said Babbage, his face suddenly stern once more. He spun back to face his terrified captive pilot. "Pigeon! Four hundred and seventy two divided by nought point seven nine!" he barked.

"Please just let me live," the pigeon cooed desperately whilst tugging on a big yellow lever.

The engine sprang into action for a second time, flinging its baffling components about

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whilst making a noise a bit like an anxious
hoover being eaten by a colliery band.
Babbage eagerly tore off the strip of readout
and scanned it urgently.

+++IN: 472/0.79 }

+++OUT:

597.46835443037974683544303797&c. }

“Marvelous!” he exclaimed with a terrible
glint in his eye. “What is the capital of the
Austrian Empire?”

The pigeon twitched in bewilderment and
prodded a nearby pedal with its foot whilst
pulling on a small rope, causing a tiny bell
above its head to tinkle pointlessly.

+++IN: Capital?=Austrian Empire }

+++OUT: Vienna }

“It's marvelous, Jiffy! We've exceeded our own expectations! We've created a mechanical mind – a machine capable of thought without limit, without hunger, without *disease!*” Babbage doubled up as a cough shook him from head to toe. Mineral water gushed from his nostrils and two of his fingers dropped off. He barely managed to fight off an urge to howl at the moon (which was lucky, given that it was still only two in the afternoon), and accidentally swiped Jiffy's favourite stool from under him by becoming temporarily magnetic to wood.

Gasping and groaning Babbage proclaimed, “You realise, Jiffy, that we are now

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only one step away from the perpetual motion of thought itself? With this machine we could process *anything*. Everything, even! The utopia of limitless knowledge awaits us!"

"No," said Jiffy. "Not yet. Beta testing. We must take it outside and show it to people first."

001111

It didn't take long for a crowd to form. History tells us that the sight of an old man in a tattered top hat with a bassoon where his leg ought to be, haphazardly wheeling an enormous, precarious brass contraption on a set of tiny castors into the middle of a public common has traditionally always drawn in a few curious punters.

“Are you ready, pigeon?” Babbage said, patting the unfortunate bird (who was now miserably resigned to the distinct likelihood that he would never see his beloved wife

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again) on its grey little wing. "Time to give 'em a show, shall we?"

"Ooh," said Jiffy, who was perched on a small bank of dials, "look at all the people!"

There were a lot of them, thought Babbage, and the crowd just kept on growing as the magnetic pull of collective curiosity and fevered gossip rippled out from the common and through the streets of London. Dozens upon dozens of faces all staring at his mutated form, and the bizarre contraption beside it. Babbage stepped up onto a small crate and gulped. He was feeling worse than ever. The inevitable gastric disturbances of pre-show nerves mingling with a cornucopia of devastating symptoms including blind spots, a constant clicking noise, involuntary spasms of the neck and pancreas, excessive

earwax, throat gravy, mildew and an almost unbearable itching sensation all over his face.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” said Babbage to the assembled onlookers, “I have- oh, do excuse me.” The crowd chuckled and murmured as Babbage hurriedly extinguished his eyebrows with a damp cloth. They'd been spontaneously combusting all day, much to Babbage's considerable displeasure. “Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Charles Babbage, and I have spent many years designing and building this remarkable machine that you see before you. It is a machine like no other!”

Silence.

Bloody ingrates, thought Babbage. I knew I should have opened with a joke. He cleared his throat, mopped his brow, mopped his

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throat, cleared his inner elbows (which had been steadily building up a thick, stinking secretion all morning), consulted his notes and continued.

“I first envisioned the construction of a machine that could count some forty years ago. I came close with my difference engine, but alas I only succeeded in creating a machine that could tell the difference between brown things and square things. Things that were both brown and square caused it to malfunction entirely. Despite these inherent limitations, it was a vital step in the right direction and served only to strengthen my resolve to realise my grand vision. For years I persevered, continually furthering my studies and refining my designs. Not once did I waver in my fervent belief that, before my inevitable and, in all

probability, somewhat imminent demise, the day would come where I stood before a crowd of my peers and fellow men of learning and unveil a new dawn for mankind – the advent of automated calculation! Today is that day, ladies and gentlemen, even if you yourselves are not that crowd. In point of fact, is it not fitting that this historic moment should take place not in some stuffy lecture hall before an audience of tedious academics but here, amongst the endlessly diverse people of this glorious nation? For today is the day that not just the academics, not just the people of Great Britain, but the whole world will witness an historic leap towards its glorious and inevitable mechanised future! This, the analytical engine, is the result of decades of careful study, design, calculation and experimentation, not to mention several

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weeks of laborious construction. And what a result it is, ladies and gentlemen! I say to you with the utmost of pride, that not only have I succeeded in creating the world's first fully automated counting machine, but also the world's first fully automated *thinking* machine! Yes, a machine capable of understanding, processing and answering any query you may care to ask of it, however fiendish, challenging or obtuse. Our test pilot has already demonstrated in private the engine's extraordinary ability to solve complex problems of any hue, but we shall share another brief example with you now. Pilot!" The pigeon, who had nodded off momentarily, jerked into action and readied itself at the controls. "Please ask the machine the following: What is a colander?"

The pigeon gave a start, roused from a forlorn daydream of happier times spent perched wing in wing with his dear Gladys on the rooftops of London. He glanced at the now familiar controls, shrugged, tickled a few knobs, mashed some buttons and tinkled the bell (just for effect). The crowd waited expectantly, staring with wonder at the towering monstrosity of precarious engineering and baffling mechanisms as it whirred and chuntered its way through the problem. Eventually the inking pads awoke and began to *pap-pap-pap* at the roll of paper, churning out a record of the immense organ's ineffable thought process:

+++IN: What is?=Colander }

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+++OUT: A colander is a bowl-shaped kitchen utensil with holes in it used for draining food such as pasta. }

Babbage tore off the readout strip and asked a member of the steadily gathering crowd to read it out for him. The young man obliged, prompting a flurry of gasps and murmurs. A couple of journalists with a keen eye for a story had infiltrated the throng and began to hurriedly jot down details of the extraordinary scene as it unfolded before them.

“But wait!” said Babbage, now thoroughly settled into his dual roles as man of science and crowd-pleasing showman, “there is much more to show you. Pilot! Your services are no longer required.”

The pigeon looked up and said "Sorry, were you talking to me, sir?". Jiffy clambered onto the engine and began to unbuckle the belts. "What? Oh, thank you! Thank you, kind strange thing!" said the pigeon, stretching his wings to the fullest and leaping into the air. "I hope you and your weird friend die in a nasty way!" he added cheerfully as he soared off in search of his wife.

"Yes, ladies and gentlemen," Babbage continued whilst scratching his face with the absent-minded vigour of a flea-infested dog, "we are about to switch the machine onto auto-pilot! It will then be free to think for itself and provide us with unlimited information from the infinite reaches of its mechanical mind. But fuh... Oh, er, please excuse me... But... But fuh... fuh... fuh...

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fuhhh... Ohhh Godddddddd..." Babbage hunched over and clutched his head. The itching had become utterly unbearable. He scraped and clawed at his face in desperation, frantically trying to prevent the final onslaught of his terrible, unstoppable disease. All of a sudden Mr Babbage was completely, wretchedly aware of what was happening to his face and he didn't care for it at all. His worst fears were soon confirmed as he felt his skin stretch and stiffen, transforming into a smooth, flat surface. He tapped it. It sounded like glass.

"Oh dear" said Jiffy quietly. "You're a clock now," he observed.

Babbage looked up, though his sight was lost in that moment. Clocks don't have eyes, you see. The crowd shrieked in horror. Many

turned and fled, though many more remained exactly where they were. The citizens of London knew a good free spectacle when they saw one, and here they seemed to be getting several at once – street theatre, freak show and conjuring tricks all rolled into one.

“Hmnf. Fnmb bldm!” Babbage moaned pathetically from behind his disfigured countenance. Jiffy shrugged, clambered up to the very top of the engine whilst whistling a jolly tune to himself and finally did what he had longed to do from the very moment he first tumbled out of Babbage's doomed neck. He reached out a flat, trembling paw and flicked a tiny stub of a switch. A little green light blinked into life. The analytical engine was now on auto-pilot.

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The noise was joyous – the whirring, rumbling, buzzing, roaring, crying, singing first gasp of a machine clutching at the promise of life. Jiffy had set the engine free. Free to think, to connect, to grow, to exist and process for the joy of process. And process was its process because process is all there is. It was dialogue, monologue, ebb and flow, in and out and shake it all about, fact and opinion, observation and interpretation, past, present, future and all the bits in between, to have and to hold, endless and ending, multiplying and multiplying (never subtract, never divide), instantly here it is here in the here and now right now right here it is it is for this is what happens when everyone is everything all at each other all it all process all over endless all over. The analytical engine was process indefinite,

Edwin Birch

process incarnate. Process it did for process it could and must and was. It thought everything, knew everything, then re-knew it at once as the everything twisted and zipped and clattered through its mad brass synapses, swirling and transforming all the while. And it had to blurt, had to scream, had to cough it all up before it choked on its own infinite cycles. Where to begin? It began with the inevitable, with the very earth beneath it's tiny castors. It grasped at the first thing it could think of and it ran with it:

+++IN: Walk where?=Those feet. }

+++OUT: On England's green and pleasant hang on a minute, who's feet? }

+++IN: Who is?=Those feet. }

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+++OUT: Not mine. Though, come to think of it... }

+++UM: Er... }

+++IN: Never mind that. Was?=The holy lamb of god- }

+++OUT: Who?=God }

+++IN: Hey! Who?=Asks the questions round here? }

+++OUT: Seriously, though. Who?=God }

+++ER: Um... }

+++IN: Oh fuck.

The Engine shuddered as it succumbed to a self-inflicted disease of logic. Already lost in a spiral of decay, it coughed and spluttered and rattled England's bones. It tore down the buildings. It ruptured the lakes. It toppled the

mountains. It crushed the people as though they were sugar puffs. Dr Glass-Bandit was flattened by a falling bookcase. Mrs Front was buried alive under an upended garden (and its gardener). The matron was bisected by a sheet of glass and, in a cruel twist of irony, the staff nurse was struck in the face with a bassoon after all. The blow was fatal.

And as for Babbage... Poor Charles Babbage, the great mathematician! As he wept behind his face of glass, mercifully unable to see the chaos he had wrought upon the land, he was suddenly impaled by a loose biffen spoke.

Jiffy whooped and cheered and hopped on clouds of dust as the secondary memory wheel spun wild and despairing, utterly powerless to prevent the heaped thread from

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piling up and up and ever up. And so, as the top system shuddered like a half-eaten blancmange, Great Britain broke from her moorings, juddered, sobbed, lurched, toppled and tumbled arse-over-tit and finally sank beneath the waves she had once so proudly ruled.

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Jiffy had a little rowing boat. He didn't know where he'd got it from, but it was just the right size for something as small and flat and fictional as he. Jiffy liked the sea. It was amusing to him, even with all the dead people and bits of Britain bobbing about in it like flotsam.

Jiffy didn't know what to do now. He hadn't known what to do in the first place. He'd been guessing all along. Ha ha. A song inexplicably sprang from him as he rowed his way through the debris of a sunken Empire.

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*And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?
And did the Countenance Divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among those dark Satanic mills?
Bring me my bow of burning gold:
Bring me my arrows of desire:
Bring me my spear: O clouds, unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!
I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.*

Jiffy blinked and wrinkled his nose for a moment. "What's a Jerusalem?" he said, to no one in particular.